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# PRIMARY ELEMENTS OF THE AMERICAN TRADITION

*an address by*  
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*President of Cornell University*



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

WASHINGTON

1942



## FOREWORD

This is the first of a series of lectures on "War Issues and Postwar Adjustment," organized at the suggestion and mainly through the efforts of Dr. M. L. Wilson, Director of Extension Work, Department of Agriculture, and jointly sponsored by the Extension Service and the Graduate School. It is our hope that the ideas presented by these men who are eminently qualified to diagnose the current ills of the world will stimulate thinking and discussion among groups far beyond the original audience.

This lecture was delivered in the Department of Agriculture Auditorium on April 4, 1942. President Day was introduced by the Secretary of Agriculture, Claude R. Wickard. Dr. Wilson presided as chairman.

ELDON L. JOHNSON,

*Director.*

# PRIMARY ELEMENTS OF THE AMERICAN TRADITION

By EDMUND E. DAY, *President, Cornell University*

Secretary Wickard, Dr. Wilson, fellow Cornellians, and fellow students from the Department of Agriculture:

My presence here this afternoon is evidence of the unwisdom of talking too much. It is commonly recognized that the surest way to get a committee chairmanship is to participate freely in the preliminary discussion of why there should be a committee. It is not so frequently recognized that if one undertakes to make a serious address one may be caught for repeat performances.

It is true that I made an address at the annual meeting of the Association of Land Grant Institutions in Chicago last November. Subsequently I heard from Dr. Wilson to the effect that it would be an acceptable contribution to your contemplated program here if I came and more or less repeated that Chicago address. Now, I am always very dubious about repeating addresses, but on this occasion I thought Dr. Wilson had special reasons; consequently, partly out of my great respect for him and partly out of my sense of attachment to this Department, I consented to come. Then, just the other day, I had a communication from Dr. Wilson which substantially changed the order. My Chicago address dealt with the subject of science and social progress; it had relatively little to say about philosophy. Now I find myself on an assignment which is supposed to deal directly with philosophical issues. Here are the specifications according to Dr. Wilson's letter: "We feel that there is need for a series of lectures and discussions for Department of Agriculture workers in particular and those in the Federal Government who are deeply interested and concerned primarily about two problems: First, what are the deep philosophical and fundamental conflicts involved in this war? Is this truly a war of conflicting ideologies? What is the nature of conflict and what are we fighting for? Second, how do we plan to interpret our philosophy and our ideals in the post-war domestic and world situation?"

Partly for my own protection, I am going to rule that the first series of questions put by Dr. Wilson may well define the limits of this first lecture in your course. The second large query posed by Dr. Wilson I shall leave for my successors. These then are the questions to which I shall direct your attention: What are the deep philosophical and fundamental conflicts involved in the war? Is this truly a war of conflicting ideologies? What is the nature of the conflict and what are we fighting for?

In the thinking of the American public with regard to the present war, these questions have thus far gone by default to a distressing extent. This has been due in part to the nature of the circumstances under which we went into the conflict. We were having considerable difficulty in clarifying our own ideas as to what the war abroad was about. There were wide divergencies of view among the American people when suddenly, and without premonition, we found ourselves actually in the war. In short, we were pushed into the war; we did not deliberately enter it. Consequently we are in it without any adequate ideological preparation.

It seems to me quite evident that we should proceed with the utmost dispatch to remedy this deficiency. I know of nothing that seems to me quite so important as it is for the American people to come to complete conviction on the very subjects which are raised in the questions Dr. Wilson has put. In so far as I can contribute my mite to this end, I am prepared to appear on occasions like this to discuss quite informally these basic questions: What is the fighting about? What are we fighting for? In what respects is this war a struggle of competing conceptions of the meaning of life?

What I should like to do in presenting this matter to you is to outline a series of propositions which seem to me to constitute primary elements of the American tradition. This clearly is but one cross-section of a very complicated subject, but it seems to me to be a cross-section that may serve usefully to initiate more extended and complete later discussions of some of the fundamental points at issue. Altogether there are nine different propositions which I should like to bring to your attention. I shall first briefly indicate what they are and what are their implications; then I shall come back to them individually with brief statements of the extent to which they are challenged in the present world conflict.

The first proposition is: Mankind craves freedom, and, given freedom, will use it responsibly. I suppose most Americans would take this as a self-evident truth. Of course mankind craves freedom! As a matter of fact, in much of human experience and certainly in our own individual lives, freedom is at times a rather terrifying thing. Surely it is often a most uncomfortable thing with which to live if we think of it as more than license to do what we choose. Clearly freedom is something very much more than that. Freedom implies responsibility. If you think of the two—freedom and responsibility—as always associated, you will see some of the questions that are raised when you say mankind craves freedom. However, in the American tradition, we have gone along with this proposition despite our occasional misgivings. We be-

lieve men should be free. We believe that only through freedom can human hope and aspiration be realized.

Another element in the American tradition is equally fundamental: The judgment and conscience of the people can be trusted. This is occasionally questioned—sometimes in high places. Obviously at times the people do go wrong; but if we are to fight for freedom we must hold fast to this basic element of faith. We must believe that with knowledge the people will show vision; that, given power, they will assure justice. We Americans must stand for government of the people, for the people, and by the people.

The third proposition is this: The rights of the state derive from the interests of the people. In other words, the state is an instrument with which the common good is promoted. It remains merely a means; back of it lies the end—the well-being of the people. This conception of the relationship between the people and the state dates from the very beginnings of orderly government on this continent. It is, in a sense, the very cornerstone of our political structure. The state is never supreme in American thought. The interest and the well-being of the people are what give the state its meaning.

The fourth proposition is closely related: The individual has rights which all government must respect. This is one of the elements of American political theory which people in other countries have most difficulty in either understanding or accepting. It is an exceedingly important doctrine. There are certain rights of the individual which cannot be denied. These rights are inalienable; they belong to the very nature of man; they must be protected in whatever political system is operative.

The fifth proposition is this: Popular education at public expense is indispensable in a democratic society. That, too, stems back to early times. One of the great early exponents was Jefferson. He has had many followers since, and the ideal has been greatly amplified. Now, no longer challenged in principle, the question is how far the principle shall be extended. The common elementary school is now fully established. The common secondary school is increasingly accepted. It is quite likely that common public education will be extended even beyond this. Already, the American people have done more in the direction of free, popular education than any other people in the history of mankind. It is part of the American tradition that, with universal suffrage, universal education of the electorate is a necessary safeguard of a truly democratic system.

The sixth proposition is of wide relevance: The pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness must not be subjected to political

control. These are streams in the life of the people which must be kept completely uncontaminated by partisan interests. The pursuit of truth must be wholly untrammelled; it must be free to go where it will. We will undertake no ordering of beauty. There is no way of legislating goodness. All three are forces in human progress which must be left essentially free. These views have been basic in the American faith.

The seventh proposition is this: Science and technology hold the key to human progress. I put this into the list with certain reservations. It will be argued in some quarters that this is not of the same order as the others I have given, and that a great many people will not accept this as a valid American tradition. However, if one will examine the spirit of America over the last century and a half, one will see that science and technology have acquired tremendous prestige. We have come to have immeasurable confidence in what pure and applied science can do for us. We expect it to perform miracles of every description; we are constantly under its domination. What power the men of science wield! What influence they exert! In a sense, science has come to have possession of us; it is the one thing in which we have developed unquestioning faith. Increasingly, I think, we have come to entertain the idea that, somehow or other, science and technology will in time give us what we would really like to have; it will actually implement the kind of human progress for which we are all so eager.

The eighth element of tradition which has figured enormously in our American life is this: The common weal will be served through the competition of self-seeking private enterprises. We may have our doubts about certain individual undertakings, but we have retained an abiding faith in the effect of the whole constellation of competing enterprises; working together, offsetting one another, compensating for one another, restraining one another, they result in a total system which we believe to be in the public interest. Over the years we have moderated the competitive system; we have imposed increasing regulations upon it; the fact remains that we have clung to the idea that the system remains essentially sound and may be expected to serve well the general welfare of all the people.

The ninth and last of the propositions which seem to me highly characteristic of the American tradition is this: The destiny of the American people lies in the hands of the American people. In other words, the future of the U. S. A. can be regarded as essentially self-determined, and not subject to serious interference from without. This idea we have had for long generations. The doctrine has been laid down in a series of official documents: some of them

notable pronouncements of American policy. As a people we have clung to the doctrine right up to date. At the moment, we are beginning to have certain questions in our mind as to whether the proposition is one that can possibly be defended in the light of current events. But we have certainly believed in it in the past. To a considerable extent, I think, it is retained still by large sections of the American people. It certainly has to be mentioned in any attempt to explain the nature of the American tradition.

I would not for a moment claim that in these nine propositions I have brought to your attention all the principal elements in this American faith of ours. Doubtless I have omitted elements, and I am sure I have not given adequate explanation of some of those I have mentioned. Perhaps, however, the listing I have given will serve to focus attention on some of the issues which are most definitely involved in the present world conflict. I shall now proceed to indicate briefly the extent to which some of these elements of the American faith are challenged in the present world conflict.

May I preface these further comments by saying that I am myself thoroughly convinced that this is a conflict of ideologies; more openly and threateningly so than seems to me to have been true of any war for centuries past. We are confronted with a choice of ideals, of conceptions of what makes life worth the living. It is quite likely that some of the issues raised in the war will not be disposed of by the war, whatever its outcome. There are more deep-seated conflicts in contemporary society than are evident in the war itself. These conflicts will require the utmost consideration of the American people after the war has actually been won.

Suppose we now take the nine propositions I have presented and see to what extent the present alignment of warring nations corresponds to an alignment between those who have faith and those who lack it.

"Mankind craves freedom, and, given freedom, will use it responsibly." It seems to me quite evident that that is a proposition which is under direct fire. We are confronted by nations which have abandoned completely the idea that mankind deserves freedom. Freedom in the opinion of our enemies is something reserved for the elite who, presumably, are the only ones entitled to it. Others are to be enslaved to these superiors. Upon the whole, that is what is "coming to them." They are deserving of nothing more, and by and large will be happier enslaved than free. Such is the doctrine with which we are confronted. World conquest! The enslavement of inferior peoples! Freedom, a privilege belonging only to the chosen! On our side, we hold to

the belief that freedom is a privilege to which *mankind* is entitled; and that, given freedom, mankind will exercise it responsibly. It is a faith which cannot be fully demonstrated; it remains an aspiration we cannot relinquish.

"The judgment and conscience of the people can be trusted." This proposition, like the first, is sharply challenged. If you will read some of the literature which has appeared on the enemy side, you will get conclusive evidence of the contempt with which the totalitarians view the judgment and conscience of the common people. A sneer greets the whole process of democratic deliberation and decision. Time-consuming for the moment, yes; inefficient at times, yes; but we freemen have confidence that, in the long run, for the long pull, there is no real substitute for the will of the people. That is far and away the most solid foundation for any social order; far and away the most secure footing for the human progress that lies ahead.

"The rights of the state derive from the interests of the people." This is the most commonly recognized challenge in the present conflict. Every one knows that with the totalitarians the state is supreme; it transcends the people; the people have no rights except those which derive from the interest and program of the state; they are subjects of a sovereign power which lies in the state. Such is the complete inversion of the whole concept of the relationship between state and people. Such is the picture presented on the side of the enemy. With such views, there can be no compromise among freemen.

"The individual has rights which all government must respect." Rights of the individual with respect to which no government can intervene? Nonsense, say the Nazis! No individual has any rights which do not derive from the permission of the state. We, on our side, hold that government may be tyrannical; tyrannical in the sense that it may deal unjustly with individuals and minorities even though the will of the majority is done. The individual has a worth of his own which all the powers of government must respect. Here are entirely different conceptions of where the focus of significance in human life lies. Is it in the mass, or in the state, or in the individuals who live in association in the larger group?

"Popular education at public expense is indispensable in a democratic society." At that point, our enemies will go along, but with a totally different notion of the function of popular education. The dictators have exploited popular education in the interest of the party program, and have done so with great adroitness and extraordinary effectiveness. We have to learn some of the methods which they have used to such great advantage. It is my opinion that we have been neglectful of the importance of popular educa-

tion in support of the free society which we are so eager to preserve. We must come to see more fully the values which lie in popular education if we are to maintain this American tradition of ours. There will be just as much popular education in the dictatorial states; it will be popular education differently motivated, designed to preserve a different kind of social order. But at this point, as indicated, there is not so much a challenge as a totally different conception of the contributions universal education should make.

"The pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness must not be subjected to political control." How different is the doctrine under the dictators! The totalitarian states have long since gone the other way. Truth now has to be of the approved variety; it has to conform. There must be Nazi chemistry and mathematics, to say nothing of Nazi philosophy and economics. Art, too, must be certified; it must promote "The Cause." Goodness comes to consist of suitable loyalty and subservience to the party. All this on formula passed down from party headquarters. There is nothing about the present world conflict which cuts any more deeply than this totally different attitude toward these basic drives in human progress toward more and more truth, beauty and goodness. These are the great forces which the dictators say must be kept under control; which we free men say must remain free.

"Science and technology hold the key to human progress." Here is a proposition on which a great deal of additional light needs to be thrown. Without doubt science and technology have made great contributions to American life. In no direction has the genius of the American people shown itself more convincingly than in the fields of invention and engineering. We know as well as any people how to make science and technology contribute to progress. The fact remains that science, whether in pure or applied form, gives no guarantee of social progress. As has frequently been pointed out, science is totally indifferent to both moral values and social well-being. Science supplies means; it does not determine ends. The Nazis have shown what happens when science is given full force. We in America must not make a like mistake. The purposes of life and society have to be determined on bases which science cannot supply. Science can implement human progress only when the nature of progress has been defined in terms of long-tested moral imperatives and religious faith.

"The common weal will be served through the competition of self-seeking private enterprises." This idea has gone out completely on the side of our enemies. All enterprise among the dictators is subject to meticulous regulation and manipulation. Generally speaking, complete socialization of the enemy economy has already been effected. On our side, we are clinging to the doc-

trine of free enterprise but with increasing doubts as to how well parts of the competitive system are working. It is quite evident that in certain fundamental respects the system has changed nature; it is not what it was originally. It started under conditions in which individual units were relatively small, and, in terms of overall power, relatively weak. We now have single combinations which pack tremendous relative power; and we are developing techniques of propaganda and of political pressure which completely alter the outlook in certain respects. Our traditional economic system is thus being challenged from without, and simultaneously in no small measure from within. This is a phase of the whole evolving situation to which we shall have to give increasing attention.

"The destiny of the American people lies in the hands of the American people." This question of the self-determination of America's future is obviously now cast in an unprecedented setting. Among the things science and technology have done for us is the eradication of distance and time in communication and travel. The world has contracted until it is a very small thing beside what it was as recently as 25 years ago. The earlier ideal of self-containment is presumably gone, and gone for all time.

The fact remains that, in considerable measure, American destiny does remain in American hands. That is one reason why it seems to me so important that we devote a large amount of our most careful and sustained thinking to some of these primary elements of the American tradition. The strongest offensive which a free people can stage in the long run is a convincing demonstration of the values that lie in freedom. That, we must never forget. At the moment, we are bound to be engrossed in the conduct of a titanic struggle of armed forces engaged in modern technological warfare. Educational institutions will be parties to this stupendous effort. For the time being, we educators must shelve some of the ideals we have with regard to more enduring values in education. We must put these temporarily aside while we devote all we can muster for technical, specialized, streamlined training and research in the winning of the war. That is true for most, if not all, of American life right now. But while we do that, we must not lose sight of the fact that, in the long run, we cannot win salvation that way. We must get back to these fundamental elements of faith that discipline and ennoble life. Over the years these elements can only be found in a combination of individual freedom and individual responsibility.

DR. WILSON: If anyone has a question that he would like to ask President Day, we should be very glad to have it put.

QUESTION: Mr. Chairman, there seemed to be one very slight

contradiction. I don't think it myself, and I don't think President Day intended it, but he made some very definite statements that popular education at public expense is essential to democratic security. Then, when he comes down to enterprise in other industries and education, he makes almost an equally strong plea for private enterprise. Now, of course, we have in education an enormous volume of private institution and we have a very large volume of public industry. I wondered if it was intentional that only public was mentioned in one, and only private in the other.

PRESIDENT DAY: I am quite aware of the fact that my treatment of those two propositions was sketchy. I suspect that in this series you will wish to devote hours to the further elaboration of the principles which should prevail in the field of education. In this connection I should express this general view. It will be unfortunate if all education in this country becomes public education. I am quite convinced that private education makes contributions which are, in the long run, highly important. So far as education of the total electorate is concerned, it is quite evident that we cannot safely leave that to private enterprise. It is too indispensable. We must make sure of it: We cannot possibly take the position, "Well, if no private organization cares to turn it out, we will get along without it." The public, having ventured into the educational field, was bound at the lower levels to establish something close to monopoly because the undertaking meant making education so extensive that it was available to every child in the country, at least in principle. I should say that in the field of education for the total electorate, the Government has to stand ready to meet the need, however great it may be. An issue that is right now up among the school men is: What about the years from, say, 16 to 20, if there are no adequate opportunities for full-time employment for young people? Is it wise for the state to stand by and simply say, "Let private education meet the need?" It seems to me quite evident that the state cannot wisely take this stand. If young people in large numbers, say three to four million of them as was the case during the 30's, are out of school and out of work, the state must act. Idle youths are potential political dynamite that no social order can afford to have lying around. I think the state has to intervene in that case and provide suitable education and employment for those young people up to the time when they can move into full-time, remunerative, private employment. In short, while I am strongly of the opinion that it is very important to keep private education going, particularly where research is involved, I am equally convinced that the state must not in any way limit the responsibility it has for the education of the total electorate.

Now, so far as the economic life is concerned, I should say that when you are dealing with something that the people must have, the state is similarly under an obligation to intervene and supply, if private enterprise does not. But with most of our goods this is not the situation; we do not have to have them. They are convenient to have, and we can rely very considerably upon private initiative and enterprise to supply them if the conditions are favorable, and otherwise get along without them. The factor in the field of economics which seems to me to be raising large questions is the high degree of concentration of power that we are getting in the individual units and the accompanying resort to political procedures which I think threaten the very principles upon which the system of free enterprise was founded. We have been accustomed to depend upon the absence of enough power in any unit to dominate the situation. Of recent years there has been increasing evidence that our economic system is more and more under the domination of large power units. The blocs and pressure groups, the large combinations and associations which have been created by pulling formerly-competing small units together, now concentrate in some cases a measure of power which nullifies the very theory of the original free enterprise system.

QUESTION: President Day, you mentioned appreciation of freedom and teaching appreciation of freedom in the schools. Is that to be accomplished by varying our presentation of political science or history, or is it to be a special subject, do you think?

PRESIDENT DAY: It seems to me clear that teaching the essentials of our way of life is a responsibility of the total school organization, not of any one subject. Unless the whole school is permeated with democratic doctrine and is constantly on the job of getting it to the learners, democratic ideals are not likely to "take" substantially. Furthermore, I do not think there is any substitute for first-hand experience of freedom with responsibility. You cannot get it satisfactorily by reading about it in books, even if you are provided with a lot of valuable material looking that way. I think the young people, as they move up through formal education, have to have first-hand experience with what freedom and responsibility in combination mean. I think that is one of the most important obligations of our colleges and universities. It is not easily accomplished. A good many young people see the freedom feature of the system, but not the responsibility.